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AUTHOR Cohen, Arthur M.
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ABSTRACT

The Western College Reading and Learning Association (WCRLA) has been a lead organization in promoting a professional consciousness among teachers of remedial studies and managers of learning laboratories. Its members are also creating an academic discipline centering on the principles of instruction. The theories of this discipline have been adopted from psychology, centering on learning and motivation, and modified to reflect the belief that all sentient people can be taught. In the development of both the discipline and the profession, the WCRLA has and should continue to produce studies of the effects of its efforts, including measures both of short- and long-term retention and success, as well as current status studies, studies of program costs, and numbers enrolled. The discipline's progress depends on the constant effort to describe treatments and demonstrate effects. By using their own methodologies and publicizing their own findings, the WCRLA and its members will further the development of a unique discipline and enhance their standing as managers of learning. (Author/EJV)

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Twenty Years of Progress Toward a Discipline

Arthur M. Cohen
Professor of Higher Education
University of California, Los Angeles

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Keynote Address to the Western College Reading and Learning Association, Annual Convention.
Albuquerque, New Mexico

April 9, 1987

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Abstract

The Western College Reading and Learning Association has been a lead organization in promoting a professional consciousness among teachers of remedial studies and managers of learning laboratories. Its members are also creating an academic discipline centering on the principles of instruction. They should produce studies of the effects of their efforts, including measures both of short-term student learning and long-tern retention and success. By using their own methodologies and publicizing their own findings they will further the development of a unique discipline and enhance their standing as managers of learning.

TWENTY YEARS OF PROGRESS TOWARD A DISCIPLINE

Keynote Address to the Western College Reading and Learning Association, Annual Convention, Albuquerque, New Mexico, April 9, 1987

Twenty years ago you were a group of teachers of remedial courses and managers of newly formed learning resource centers seeking like-minded colleagues with whom you could share ideas. You were on the periphery of collegiate activities, the people to whom the traditional faculty sent the students for whom they cared not or were unable to teach. You were finding your own professional identity and your then-called Western College Reading Association helped.

In the intervening twenty years you have moved from the periphery to the mainstream. You are still teachers of remedial classes but you are also managers of student flow. You have expanded your activities on behalf of student placement. Your learning resource centers have become integral parts of the instructional programs. You provide academic support services to many of the other departments. And you are involved in measuring instructional outcomes.

Part of this move may be attributed to developments in the colleges as a whole. The numbers of poorly prepared students have expanded greatly. Testing is perceived as an acceptable practice for sorting students into classes where they can succeed. The colleges are increasingly called to account for their outcomes. But you deserve a large measure of credit. You have seized on the tasks that needed to be done if the

colleges were to fulfill their promises to their matriculants. You have accepted the unappreciated job and moved into a position of responsibility. And along the way, probably without realizing it, you have begun forming not only a professional specialty but also a new academic discipline.

THE PROFESSION

A profession concerns itself with many matters, especially the welfare of its members and the promotion of their work. It seeks to elevate the status of what its members do. It is concerned with the perceptions held by other professionals and by the public at large. It seeks to better the conditions under which its members operate. It furthers what the group believes in.

I went through my predecessors' keynote addresses at this convention to see what they said about the development of the organization and found several comments about your incipient professional status. At the seventh annual convention Lee Medsker predicted a trend toward measuring student outcomes and commented that it would eventually give credence to your work. At the ninth annual convention Patricia Heard asked rhetorically, "Is the learning specialist a professional?" At the 10th convention Jon Hagstrom spoke on your interest in mastery learning. At the 12th convention Catherine Warwick mentioned how you were different from the traditional faculty who, as she put it, "know very little about teaching and learning." At the 15th Hunter Boylan said that you are not yet a profession, that you should become more self-conscious. And at the 18th meeting Carole Bogue spelled out your moves toward a professional status, pointing out

how your interinstitutional communication, documenting and reporting outcomes, and publicizing your efforts were all having an effect.

I also went through a sample of the materials that have been published through ERIC and in your core journals over the past twenty years. I scanned issues of the Journal of Developmental Education, Teaching English in the Two-Year Colleges, and Inside English. I looked at the occasional articles regarding your work that are carried in the Community and Junior College Journal, Community College Review, Community and Junior College Research Quarterly, and The Journal of Reading. And I went through your own Journal of College Reading and Learning.

The topics in these journals reflect your concern for your work and the way that you have become a self-aware group. There are articles on peer tutoring and grade inflation. There are arguments about the pros and cons of statewide competency testing and of mandatory testing at the college level. There are descriptions of the organization of the reading and writing laboratory. And there are numerous articles on the various treatments you apply to students who come within your purview: computer assisted writing instruction, the relationships between reading and writing, the differences between writing and editing, and the effects of note-taking, journal-keeping, and instruction in listening. You have been tracing how you have organized your activities, what you do, and how it effects student progress.

My conclusion was easy to form: you are becoming professionalized. WCRLA has led the way in assisting you to share your concerns. The National Association for Developmental

Education and the Illinois Association for Personalized Learning Programs are doing similar work. These communication links are essential for your professionalization.

BASIS OF THE DISCIPLINE

An academic discipline forms the basis for professional practice but it is conceptually different. A discipline includes an organized body of knowledge, specific definitions, axioms, premises, research methodologies, and a specialized language. All interact to develop a way of looking at the world and advancing knowledge. As example, before Newton, the properties of materials were described as "strong, large, heavy, thick," and so on. Newton codified the concepts, "mass, torque, tension, gravity," and the discipline of physics was enabled to emerge, which in turn formed the basis of the profession of engineering.

No one sets out to create a discipline de novo. It forms in the interstices between other disciplines, taking elements from them. It finds its own theories, each of which is, as Snow defines it, "A symbolic construction designed to bring generalizable facts (or laws) into systematic connection." Your theories have been adopted from psychology, centering on learning and motivation, modified to reflect your own belief that all sentient people can be taught. Your axioms include the value of advance organizers, the active learner, practice and repetition, and equivalent behavior, all as they effect student learning. You have a specialized language with its roots in education: instruction is the process of effecting learning; learning is a change capability for or tendency toward acting in particular ways; a learning objective is a statement of what an individual

is able to do at the end of a period of instruction. Instruction is itself the content of your discipline.

The traditional academicians opened the way for your new discipline by insisting on the right to sort students in preference to instructing them, by ignoring or misusing reproducible media, by denying the principles of instruction in favor of the content of their own parent fields. In return for your efforts at teaching the students whom they had no willingness or ability to teach, they read you out of their academic organizations, including, in many cases, the academic departments in your own colleges. As you built your learning laboratories and developmental education efforts, it became easy for the traditional instructors to say that you were no longer of them. You had denied some of their most closely cherished premises, especially the one holding that true instruction can occur only in a classroom with one instructor, a small group of students, a chalk board, and a closed door.

Your managing the conditions of learning through the use of tutors, aides, and reproducible media accentuated the separation. The typical academic discipline-based faculty does not know how to work together to effect learning; 30 percent of the liberal arts instructors have been involved with tutors, 10 percent with paraprofessional aides, five percent with readers (Cohen and Brawer, 1982, p. 149). They have held content, the notion of what is to be learned, as their Holy Grail. <u>How</u> it is to be learned is considered secondarily, if at all.

You have avoided the controversies over what to teach. You

assume that reading, writing, and thinking are salutary to each individual's personal development, progress in college, progress in the society, and success in the world of work. You accept the definition of literacy as the ability to function adequately in the context of a person's work, everyday life, or progress in school. Your efforts are outcome oriented. Just as it is rare to find traditional instructors who define clearly stated, measurable learning objectives, it is rare to find one of you who does not.

Each new discipline must prove itself. The fact that you are here together seeking better ways of effecting student learning is not in itself sufficient for the progress of the discipline. You must be about collecting evidence of instructional effects, finding your research agenda, developing your postulates and your methodologies.

A RESEARCH AGENDA

What shall your research agenda be? The part of it that relates to the development of your profession includes conducting current status studies, studies of program costs, numbers enrolled. Here you argue for or against mandatory or volitional placement, mainstreaming or separation. You discuss the uses of academic support services and of the various tools used to sort students.

But progress in the discipline, as differentiated from the profession, demands studies with somewhat more rigor. These are studies in which you describe the treatments applied to different populations and the outcomes of those treatments. Here you investigate the differences between the use of single media and

multimedia, vague criteria and defined outcomes, different ways of organizing supports for learning. Your dependent variables are the students' ability to write a coherent composition, to complete a college-level course with a satisfactory grade, to stay in school and/or graduate, to increase scores made on standardized tests.

Many of your studies have begun furthering the development of your discipline by centering on descriptions of instruction and its results. A scan of the ERIC documents yielded a sample of such studies. Baker (1982) compared the effectiveness of remedial classes with that of traditional courses of study by examining students in the two groups according to the scores they made on the McGraw-Hill Writing Test. He used randomly chosen student essays from the two classes. Johnson (1985) compared grades earned in other classes by students who had been through the developmental studies program. Suter (1983) conducted a similar study focusing on grades and retention rates. A study done at Butte College (1985) used the success of students who transferred as the dependent variable indicating the value of the remedial classes. Marcotte (1986) used graduation rates as the dependent variable and tracked the students who graduated back through the developmental education program to determine its effects. Michels (1986) conducted a similar study using retention as a dependent variable. All those studies described the treatments applied and tracked their effect on student learning as measured by grades earned in other classes, persistence rates, and scores made on various testing instruments. Each had its

description of the treatment and its measurement of outcomes. None was excessively concerned with a control group.

You need studies of the type described. You need to hold your treatments and dependent variables constant. Your studies may be retrospective, beginning with the students who graduate and tracing them back through or they may be prospective, following a group from entrance. Other studies might be cross sectional, viewing exactly what is happening to students in various sectors of the college under various instructional treatments. You can also do studies with short time frames, for example, using the Nelson-Denny, the Degrees of Reading Power, or a similar instrument in a pre-post measure to estimate the gain attributable to your instructional treatment. But your more influential studies will be those with a longer view, documenting students' staying in school and succeeding in the workplace.

Do not let your inability to account for all external influences dissuade you. You need not attempt to set up experimental and control groups. Research in the humanities and the social sciences does not depend on control groups. Psychology has them in its studies with short time frames but the lasting value of your studies will be in demonstrating longer range outcomes. How many students persisted in your college before your programs were established? How many succeed now? Those types of studies can never control for all extrinsic influences, nor need they attempt to.

This point deserves reiteration. You must not let the methodology control your studies. Those researchers who are excessively enamored of certain methodologies fall into grievous

error. As example, the researchers who set out to demonstrate the differential effects of community colleges and universities usually fail to note that regression analysis depends on the assumption of equivalency at the outset. When they use that statistical tool in trying to determine the most influential variables in students' passage through two types of institutions, they implicitly assume that all students had equal opportunity to attend any of the institutions. That is clearly not the case and no equating of students on gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, or prior academic achievement will make it so.

You have the forum for reporting your studies: journals, conferences, and the ERIC system which can index, abstract, and make public as many studies as you can produce. Theory will emerge from them. This is inductive, the deriving of the general from the particulars. Analyze 500 studies describing instructional treatments and outcomes and you will know what your postulates are. Are 500 studies too much to expect? There are more than 3,000 colleges in the United States and most of them have remedial or developmental efforts along with some form of learning laboratory. If the learning specialists in half of them reported one study every three years, 500 would be available for examination.

DEVELOPING PROFESSION AND DISCIPLINE

Your profession and your discipline are emerging simultaneously. As a professional group you will seek to improve the conditions of your work, striving to promote that in which you believe. Your discipline's progress will depend on your constant effort to describe your treatments and demonstrate your effects. The two go hand in hand. As example, the practice of law is a

profession; the study of jurisprudence is a discipline. Engineering as a profession rests on the disciplines of mathematics and physics. The practice of medicine is a profession depending on the disciplines of biology and chemistry and their various offshoots. And, not incidentally, the physicians' greatest contributions to human welfare have come when they have taken knowledge gained from their discipline-based studies and applied it to the broader community, as for example when they convinced the city fathers to put the sewers underground or, more recently, when they convinced at least a large segment of the public that smoking was hazardous to their health.

What shall your discipline be called? The word, "Instruction," or, "Learning" must certainly be part of the title. What should the modifier be? Basic or Radical Instruction? Essential or Fundamental Learning? You might consider calling yourselves the Association for Basic College Instruction; that appellation has some appeal because it has the ABCs in its acronym.

The next twenty years will be good for you. Since the traditional academic community would not define outcomes and otherwise attend to the discipline of instruction, you have thrived. If all the faculty had defined entry and exit competencies, used varied instructional media, and organized the academic support services that their students so desperately need, you would not have emerged. Since there is little likelihood of their changing, you will maintain your intensely valuable instructional settings. You will develop the discipline of basic college instruction. And along the way, you will be recognized as the true managers of learning in your colleges.

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